

## A Highly Controversial Case of Espionage—A Summary June 19

In the 1950s, the case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg was highly controversial. It remains so today in many quarters. There is a strong SIGINT connection to the case. Recently, when reviewing some past *History Today* articles, we realized that, at least partly because this daily feature was much shorter a few years ago, we had treated this important case, and the related case of David and Ruth Greenglass, in a rather fragmented way.

So, today, we are going to present a unified summary or wrap-up of what everybody ought to know about the Rosenberg case and its SIGINT connection.

Project VENONA was an effort by NSA (and its predecessors) from World War II until about 1980 to exploit espionage communications to and from the Soviet Union. Messages sent by the Soviet espionage organization best known as the KGB had begun during the war. These messages had been enciphered on a one-time pad and initially were considered unbreakable; however, shortly after the war, analysis showed that the Soviets had misused their own system, and at least portions of messages could be exploited by cryptanalysts.

Eventually, all or parts of about 3,000 messages, sent to and from Moscow from 1942 to 1946, were solved. These decrypts provided real insights into the North American operations of the KGB and were shared with the FBI—under an agreement that stipulated the decrypts could be used to stimulate investigations, but never were to be used in court or otherwise made public.

It is important to note that the cryptanalysis of the VENONA messages occurred at least five years after the events they described. However, old as it was, the information from the messages was highly valuable to the U.S. Intelligence Community, especially the FBI.

The decrypted KGB messages revealed numerous instances in which the Soviet Union had obtained U.S. military and diplomatic secrets from Americans willing to betray their country, mostly for ideological reasons. The Americans were

identified by covernames, but the FBI, through good police work, was able to identify about one hundred of them. Once the individuals were identified, the FBI then had to develop evidence about their crimes that could be used to prosecute them at a trial.

Three covernames that attracted attention were LIBERAL (originally, ANTENNA), BUMBLEBEE, and GOOSE. The FBI began collating data points from the VENONA decrypts to facilitate identification.

GOOSE, as it turned out, had no access to secrets himself. He was a courier. The KGB mistakenly believed the FBI was following its officers closely in the United States; after all, that's what would happen in their own country. In actuality, during World War II the FBI was interested in Nazi spies, not Soviet. Based on their mistaken concept, the KGB used Americans as couriers, who would pick up material from treasonous Americans and put it in a "dead drop" for later retrieval by the KGB. GOOSE eventually was identified through his travels (transportation was carefully controlled during the war); he was Harry Gold, a pharmaceutical lab technician from the Philadelphia area who liked to fantasize about being a master spy. Once arrested, Gold proudly told all and served as a witness against other Americans who had engaged in spying.

One of those who had passed information to GOOSE was BUMBLEBEE. He was David Greenglass, a machinist who worked on the atomic bomb project in New Mexico.

The most active spy, at least as seen in VENONA messages, was LIBERAL. VENONA decrypts gave tantalizing details about him: he was an electrical engineer who had worked for the Army Signal Corps before the war but had been dismissed as a security risk. He now got secret information about U.S. weapons development from friends who were electrical engineers still working for the government. Other personal data about LIBERAL came out in messages, but the information was not quite enough to establish his identity.

Then a decrypted message explained that Greenglass (BUMBLEBEE) had been persuaded to pass information to the Soviets by his brother-in-law—LIBERAL! Julius Rosenberg and his wife Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg were arrested in 1950.

The Justice Department convinced Greenglass to turn state's evidence against his sister and brother-in-law by threatening to arrest his wife Ruth Greenglass as well, which would leave no one to care for their children. They didn't tell BUMBLEBEE this, of course, but there were VENONA messages which revealed that Ruth (known by the covername WASP) had run errands for the KGB, possibly even providing a safe house for meetings.

The Rosenberg trial was itself controversial. The prosecution's case rested on a few espionage artifacts and testimony by David Greenglass (BUMBLEBEE) and Harry Gold (GOOSE). The prosecution sought the death penalty for both Julius and Ethel, and got it; when the judge sentenced them, he blamed them for starting the Korean War. The judge said that the Soviets never would have ordered North Korea to invade South Korea if they had not had the atomic bomb secrets provided by the Rosenbergs. To put this in perspective, in truth, the Rosenbergs had passed weapons-related information but nothing about the atomic bomb; they had persuaded Greenglass to pass what he knew to the Soviets, though.

The Rosenbergs' death sentence then went to the appeals phase. In addition to many Americans who felt the trial had been unfair, the Soviets stimulated demonstrations worldwide against the verdict and sentence. There were charges that the death penalty had been imposed because of official U.S. government anti-Semitism or in response to the public's anti-communist hysteria.

The Rosenbergs went to the electric chair in Sing Sing Prison on June 19, 1953, a few minutes before the Jewish Sabbath began. It was their wedding anniversary.

The Rosenberg case is still controversial in many circles. VENONA decrypts, declassified and released in 1995, clearly show how active Julius was on behalf of the Soviets—one message quotes the KGB as worrying about putting him out of action through overwork! The question of Ethel's guilt is less clear.

Two VENONA decrypts show that Ethel was a loyal communist, that she knew about her husband's espionage activities, and that she may have done some errands for the KGB. The decrypts do not suggest she committed any crimes worthy of capital punishment. One feeling among historians today is that the death penalty was imposed on her to put pressure on Julius to name some of his sources who had not then been identified in return for leniency. But the Rosenbergs were committed communists and went to the chair rather than rat out others.

David Greenglass served a decade in prison and was released in 1960; he lived under an alias in the New York area and died in 2014. Ruth died in 2008. Harry Gold was released after 15 years in prison and died in 1972.